

Written Testimony of Beth Varas

To Appropriations Committee

My name is Beth Varas, and I am an Advocate that works with the Disabilities Network of Eastern CT, and I am a registered voter in the town of North Stonington. The Disabilities Network of Eastern CT is a non-profit agency and Independent Living Center that assists those with disabilities of all ages and disability types who reside in the 38 towns we service in Windham, New London and Tolland counties. We are one out of five Independent Living Center in CT. Our goal is to provide services that empower individuals with disabilities to live as independently as possible in the community of their choosing, no matter their circumstances.

As an advocate working at The Disabilities Network of Eastern CT for 5 months, I have assisted many consumers in achieving a variety of different goals of their choosing. Several consumers I have worked with have been home bound due to living with physical disabilities and they did not have the financial resources to have home modifications completed that would enable them to exit and enter their residences independently. The first home modification I assisted with was a stair lift installation for a 41 year old man who had recently suffered an anoxic brain injury. As a result, he required total care. He was no longer independent with mobility and the only bedroom they had available in their small home was in the ground level at the bottom of the stairs. In order for them to take him to medically necessary appointments it took two people to carry him up the stairs to the front door. When they returned home it took them over 20 minutes to carry him safely back down the stairs to his room. This man and his family were so grateful after the stair lift was installed. I had a tear in my eye watching the video they sent with a thank you email; it was of him giving a big smile and thumbs up as he safely descended the stairs on his new lift.

I have provided countless callers to our agency with information, referral resources, and connections to other community organizations and social service facilities providing the largest range of help achievable. We assist with applying for benefits, health insurance, SSDI, and community services, many of which empower and enable consumers the ability to remain living in the community and in their homes.

In the small amount of time since I started at DNEC, the largest need people call about is housing. It is almost a daily occurrence that people are on the verge of homelessness or are homeless and they do not know who to turn to. There is a huge disparity of affordable housing in the state with most housing authorities and affordable housing choices either on endless waiting lists or who are no longer taking names. The cost of living continues to increase making it harder and harder for people to afford the increased cost of rent. We are not able to provide adequate housing services as we do not have the staff nor the budget to provide this assistance along with the other services we deliver. We assist with filling out housing applications and by sharing housing resources but want to be able to help more in securing housing for our consumers. Due to the scale of the housing crisis, when people are in the process of being evicted, usually within days of their call, and have nowhere to go, we often must suggest calling 211 to find an available bed in a homeless shelter as their only option, and hope they may be pushed to the top of the list for available housing.

All of the Independent Living Centers in CT truly need a housing coordinator who can keep up to speed on what housing is available in the communities they serve, know when waiting lists for the Housing Choice Voucher or section 8 program open up for consumers to apply and get on a wait list. If this position were to exist in our Independent Living Centers, their advocates could help far more people to avoid homelessness and eviction and to remain in a healthy living situation, plus enable every advocate the time to assist more consumers.

The five Independent Living Centers also need a Community Advocate for each center. This person would go out into the community and assess things like accessible parking, safe sidewalks, anything that helps or hinders the disabled population in their area. By identifying these needs and providing solutions to them, we would be creating a more accessible and inviting environment. It would allow those living with disabilities more freedoms by enabling them to integrate into their communities and providing more recreational, social, and spiritual opportunities.

In closing I'd like to mention that the Independent Living Centers in CT provide essential services to some of the most vulnerable residents and the largest minority group in our state. The funding provided to our Centers is very low in comparison to other states, causing the Advocates assisting those in need to become overworked and overwhelmed at times which leads to burn out. More funding allocated to our centers will allow us to provide better quality services while assisting even more people in need. With the approval of our proposed budget, it would allow our centers to empower and assist an even greater number of individuals living with disabilities in CT.